



Cincinnati Courthouse Riot of 1884

Topic Guide for Chronicling America (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>)

Introduction

In 1884, the city of Cincinnati had a high crime rate, corrupt officials, and unhappy citizens regarding labor conditions. On March 27, following a verdict of manslaughter in a clear case of murder, a mob had formed with the intent to find the guilty party, William Berner, and lynch him. The following day would lead to one of the worst riots in American history as the mob grew to 10,000 people, prompting the Ohio National Guard to be called upon to disperse the angry crowd. Things would escalate quickly when the mob reached the jail. One attacker was shot dead by the servicemen, sending the mob into a violent frenzy. By the end of the first day, five people would die, but the mob had dispersed. With unfinished business, the mob returned to the jail and the courthouse on March 29, setting fire to the courthouse and blocking any attempt by fire rescuers to put out the blaze. Looting ran wild, and more National Guard troops were deployed to the city. By March 30, the rioters continued but would soon dissipate due to the overwhelming presence of the National Guard, returning the city to order. At the end of the three day riot, 56 people had died, over 300 were wounded, and many businesses were destroyed. The cause of the riots, William Berner, was not even in Cincinnati during this time. He had been sent to the Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus for his own safety.

Important Dates

- March 26, 1884: A jury finds William Berner guilty of manslaughter.
- March 27, 1884: Members of the jury are harassed and assaulted by an angry mob.
- March 28, 1884: The mob grows and attacks the jail. Order is briefly restored later that night.
- March 29, 1884: Gunfights break out and the courthouse is burned to the ground.
- March 30, 1884: Order is restored after one final attack by the mob.

Suggested Search Strategies

- Try the following terms in combination (as an "all" word search), proximity or as phrases: Cincinnati, riot, mob, fire, courthouse, jail, William Berner, troops, order.
- Limit your search to the year 1884. Cincinnati has a long history of riots and several others took place during the span that *Chronicling America* covers.
- Search newspapers in all states, not just Ohio.

Sample Articles from Chronicling America

- "[Rioting and Bloodshed](#)" *Evening Critic* (Washington, D.C.), March 29, 1884, Image 1, col. 3-4.
- "[The Jail Mobbed](#)" *Highland Weekly News* (Hillsborough, OH), April 2, 1884, Image 2, col. 5.
- "[The Cincinnati Mob Subdued](#)" *Stark County Democrat* (Canton, OH), April 3, 1884, Image 8, col. 3.
- "[Red Ruin](#)" *Belmont Chronicle* (St. Clairsville, OH), April 3, 1884, Image 2, col. 2-3.
- "[An Awful Indignation Riot in Cincinnati](#)" *Hocking Sentinel* (Logan, OH), April 4, 1884, Image 2, col. 2-3.
- "[Quelled By Law](#)" *Perrysburg Journal* (Perrysburg, OH), April 4, 1884, Image 4, col. 1-4.